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In/out of China: Exercising Positionality through Mental Maps

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Abstract

This paper explores critical pedagogical practices through a case study on China as spatial alterity, analysing students' creative mental maps in an undergraduate E-Tourism course. As part of a decolonial effort to reframe curricula, the study interrogates students' positionalities toward China, the act of mapping as a (bio)political gaze, and the complexities of engaging geopolitically diverse classrooms. Building on literature on cognitive mapping and spatial imaginaries, it foregrounds drawings as expressions of (geo)political stance. Using a constructivist socio-semiotic approach, the paper argues for a renewed role of human geography in Italian higher education, where geographic literacy is often marginal. It contributes to debates on Western versus Sinocentric cartographies, highlighting mental mapping as a critical, situated methodology for knowledge co-production.

Keywords: Geographical Imagination, Mental Maps, Decolonising Curriculum, China, Sinocentric Cartography, Situated Knowledge, Positionality

1. Introduction

The geographic "mental map" is often misunderstood as a simple drawing exercise, where landmasses and bodies of water emerge from a blank space, typically marked by national borders and select urban or physical features deemed important enough to merit representation. Yet, as geographer Charles Gritzner reminds us, the 'geographic task' is considerably more complex: "[...] Oh, and don't forget to include less tangible features such as human perceptions, aspirations, and relative degrees of social and economic wellbeing. For teaching purposes, you also certainly will want to divide your map into the myriad regions that geographers used as 'convenience packages' to organize information" (Gritzner, 2004, p. 44). While conventional pedagogical approaches often acknowledge the multifaceted nature of geographical thinking and its holistic methodologies, this paper focuses on mental mapping as a critical didactic practice grounded in knowledge co-production and decolonial perspectives (hooks, 1994; Crampton and Krygier, 2006; Ostendorf and Thoma, 2022). Specifically, it explores the implications of asking students to depict spatial alterities through drawing *prior* to receiving detailed information about global-local interconnections.

In doing so, the paper challenges the assumption that critical thinking is an autonomous, individualistic process, divorced from socio-cultural context. Instead, it follows Ostendorf and Thoma (2022) in arguing that critical reflection is always (co)shaped by the environments in which it is practiced.

Geographic mental maps can function as a form of naïve cartographic practice, particularly when created by individuals without formal training in geography. In such cases, they reveal elements of "ordinary consciousness" that emerge through introspection and self-reflection—visual-spatial representations of specific worldviews shaped in creative ways (Zelyanskaya et al., 2017). This paper examines the geopolitical significance of such naïve cartographic outputs by analysing the graphic and textual materialities present in the maps through a socio-semiotic lens (Ledin and Machin, 2019). Rather than focusing on geographic literacy as the accurate depiction or omission of objective, quantifiable features, this approach centres on how participants' (geo)political positionalities emerge through the act of drawing spatial alterities. As Seemann (2022, p. 1) puts it, participants may be seen to "draw *their* world rather than *the* world" (emphasis in original). The analysis is informed by a wide body of literature on mental and cognitive mapping as tools for exploring spatial relations and local sense of place across different demographic groups (Lynch, 1960; Kong et al., 1994; Wiegand, 1995; Crampton, 2001; Da Vinha, 2012; Reynolds and Vinterek, 2016; Zelyanskaya et al., 2017; Seemann, 2022). More recent studies build on Perkins' exploration of contextual knowledge to better understand the significance of mapping processes across diverse societal and cultural regimes. Moving beyond the cognitive-semiotic domain, these studies examine cartography within the phenomenological sphere, where it is considered both a biopolitical tool and through its social life (Perkins, 2008, 2009).

This paper reflects the topics and teaching methods I introduce at the start of the course *Chinese Culture and Society*, aiming to engage students with China's alterities. The approach can be understood as an effort to introduce decolonising worldviews into the curricula of the undergraduate E-Tourism program at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The course predominantly focuses on hospitality and tourism economics, with cultural, anthropological, geographical, and geopolitical dimensions only minimally addressed. The significance of these aspects for students' broader learning and professional development is seldom emphasised. As Heilbronn explains, "[T]he call to decolonise the curriculum is a demand for justice, which [...] also involves acknowledging that colonial people were denied the right to have their culture and knowledge systems recognised as valid and had to accept an imposed way of dealing with the world" (Heilbronn, 2025, p. 2). The case study on mapping China as spatial alterity serves as an initial educational step to "convey the importance of other ways of seeing the world" (Heilbronn, 2025, p. 6), encouraging critical awareness of diverse worldviews, narratives, and structural oppression at the micro-level of classroom dynamics (Fu, 2024). This also aligns with critiques of Western-centric cartographic production as the "correct" visual system for representing spatial knowledge, as discussed in the theoretical framework. In this context, the novelty of this study lies in three key contributions: first, the use of mental maps within the E-Tourism curriculum in Italy, where geography is largely absent; second, the methodological choice to combine socio-semiotic analysis with cognitive mapping; and third, the framing of mental maps as a tool for decolonial pedagogy. These elements position this study at the intersection of critical pedagogy, geography, and tourism studies, advancing the discourse on how mapping practices can challenge dominant knowledge systems and foster more inclusive educational practices.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section introduces the theoretical framework, which combines geographical imagination, cartographic drawing, and (geo)political positionality. This is followed by the presentation of data and methodology, grounded in pedagogical scaffolding theory and a constructivist socio-semiotic approach to data analysis. The third section examines how the cartographic drawing process may be shaped by

gazing attitudes, transforming visual representations into (bio)political tools for spatial differentiation and ordering. The *Chinese Culture and Society* course aims to deconstruct entrenched discourses about China, placing emphasis on inner introspection, situated knowledge, and knowledge co-production (Haraway, 1988). Positionality is introduced as a key procedural concept to navigate spatial alterities with a heightened sense of collective responsibility (Moosavi, 2023). In doing so, the paper highlights the contrast between Western-centric and Sinocentric spatial imaginaries, shedding light on the stereotypes embedded in these perspectives. The article concludes by suggesting that mental maps, as a visual research methodology, may offer a useful approach to decolonising spatial alterities through critical thinking. However, this potential is likely to be more effectively realised if the lecturer acts as a scaffolding facilitator, demonstrating an informed understanding of non-Western ontologies and drawing from a sound knowledge of local cultures, histories, and languages. Finally, the case study contributes to ongoing debates about the role of human geography in university curricula, positioning geographical literacy as a matter of both personal and collective responsibility. This is especially relevant in Italy, where geography is increasingly marginalised across academic disciplines. As Sidaway (2013) notes, area studies are inherently context-dependent, and "these contexts must be critically mapped and unmapped. In this move, the interfaces between geography and area studies become cognizant of their historically generated intersections, privileges, and lacunae, and of the prospects of stepping outside them" (Sidaway, 2013, p. 996).

2. Theoretical framework

The process of drawing a geographic mental map is rooted in geographical imagination, which "affords ways of thinking about space and place, whether conscious or unconscious, emphasizing how power shapes practices, behaviors, and social structures" (Gieseking, 2017, p. 1). Geographical imagination encompasses the intellectual and emotional ways individuals and societies conceptualise space, place, and environment (Tuan, 1977). It shapes how people envision distant places and how these imaginations influence cultural, social, and political processes, as well as knowledge production (Gregory, 1994). Additionally, it impacts the representational sphere, such as maps, narratives, and media, moulding the collective understanding of spatial alterities through the visual (Cosgrove, 2008). Harley (1988) argues that maps are imbued with iconological symbols, and "it is on this symbolic level that political power is most effectively reproduced, communicated, and experienced through maps" (Harley, 1988, p. 279). Maps designed for mass dissemination, such as in newspapers or educational materials, reveal their social function by triggering "geopolitical imagination" through selective world representations, creative scales, and deliberate distortions of cartographic perspectives, challenging the conventional (i.e., Western) scientific framework (Cosgrove and Della Dora, 2005). Power geometries inform these representations, influencing the (re)production of spatial (in)visibility and reflecting the intersection of geopolitics with visual culture (Hughes, 2007).

Considering the construction of space as a dynamic process based on relational mechanisms of socioeconomic power hierarchies (Harvey, 1973), geographical imagination, understood as a creative and potentially subversive device, may open the way for less unjust and preconceived alternatives, allowing space to manifest its plurality (Massey, 2004, 2005; Pierce, 2022). Following Appadurai (1996), imagination is a collective, social fact that may reveal the entanglement with broader cultural and historical conjunctures and ideological discourses in its individual material expressions. Thus, while engaging in self-reflection on our worldview, the "ordinary consciousness" (Zelyanskaya et al., 2017) emerging from naïve cartographic performance may also foster a transformative shift toward collective responsibility and heightened socio-political awareness (Thrift, 1987).

Chinese premodern and pre-1949 cartographic traditions have faced epistemological violence from Western-centric cartography, often dismissed in the early

twentieth century as evidence of scientific backwardness (e.g., Smith, 1996; Park, 2010; Akin and Mumford, 2012). Imperialist powers also used maps as instruments to assert control over Chinese territories and waterscapes (Li, 2017; Song, 2017; Cheng, 2024). In contrast, Sinocentrism shaped Ming and Qing maps, as well as nationalist cartography during the Republican period (pre-1949), rooted in ideas of cultural hegemony and China's territorial sovereignty, which extended to Southeast and Central Asia through historical mercantile and cultural ties (Callahan, 2009) [1]. Post-1949 China's cartography emphasises border security and defence mechanisms aimed at protecting the nation from imperialist forces. It also charts an alternative atlas of alliances with non-aligned states, where China plays a leading political role. This highlights how geographical mapping establishes a hierarchical knowledge system that still privileges Western epistemologies as the source of modern, rational knowledge (Quijano, 2007). By engaging with critical geo-graphic drawing (Crampton and Krygier, 2006) and cartographic orientalism (Somdahl-Sands, 2015), mapping exercises also highlight the importance of addressing distortion and "cartocentrism" (e.g., Quatrida, 2024) from a decolonial perspective, emphasising how "the centre is always 'elsewhere', i.e., where the earlier colonising power was" (Kong et al., 1994). Through textbook maps, for instance, students from the Global South and East ("the majority world") are still exposed to Eurocentric representations (e.g., Kong et al., 1994). Even in lay episodes of cartographic media, the "right to draw" is often granted only if tacit spatial hierarchies align with the "expected [Western-centric] mental image" (Axelsen and Jones, 1987, p. 451). Therefore, the materiality of socially informed gazing and (geo)political positionality takes shape in the practice of drawing mental maps of spatial alterities, as discussed in the case study in the following section.

[1] In 1602, the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, together with Chinese scholar-officials Zhong Wentao, Li Zhizao, and others, completed the *kunyu wanguo quantu* (lit., "Map of the Myriad Countries of the World"), positioning East Asia at the centre.

3. Data and methodology

Considering the phenomenological turn in geography, drawing as a didactic method is understood beyond its representational value; that is, cartographic drawing is also reframed as a process based on socio-cultural and political contingency (Seemann, 2022). This approach draws on Gillian Rose's understanding of visual research methods, particularly her claim that "the relationship between VRM [visual research methods] and visual culture consists of their shared understanding of images as tools with which communicative work is done" (Rose, 2014, p. 27). In this sense, the cognitive mental maps produced in a classroom conceived as a safe space—and situated in the Global North—serve as a *pre-text* to explore how cultural imaginaries are visually (re)produced and how hegemonic political discourses may be performed through drawing. This also creates an opening to reflect on students' positionalities in relation to spatial alterities. The classroom composition supported this inquiry: East Asian students comprised no more than 15% of the cohort, while Italian nationals formed the majority. Additional diversity was provided by North European, East European, and Central Asian students, contributing to a heterogeneous socio-cultural environment. A total of 38 drawings were analysed (Figure 1).

The cognitive mapping exercise unfolded in three stages, combining individual and collaborative work.

The first dataset emerged from an online wordcloud co-produced with students during an impromptu brainstorming session (Figure 2). While offering a creative entry point into Chinese spatialities, the wordcloud also served to triangulate data once the maps were produced, helping to mitigate speculative interpretations. Created using the open-source platform Wordclouds.com, it functioned as a form of "carto-talk [...] in order to capture ideas, stories and emotions beyond the tracing of lines" (Seemann, 2022, p. 12).

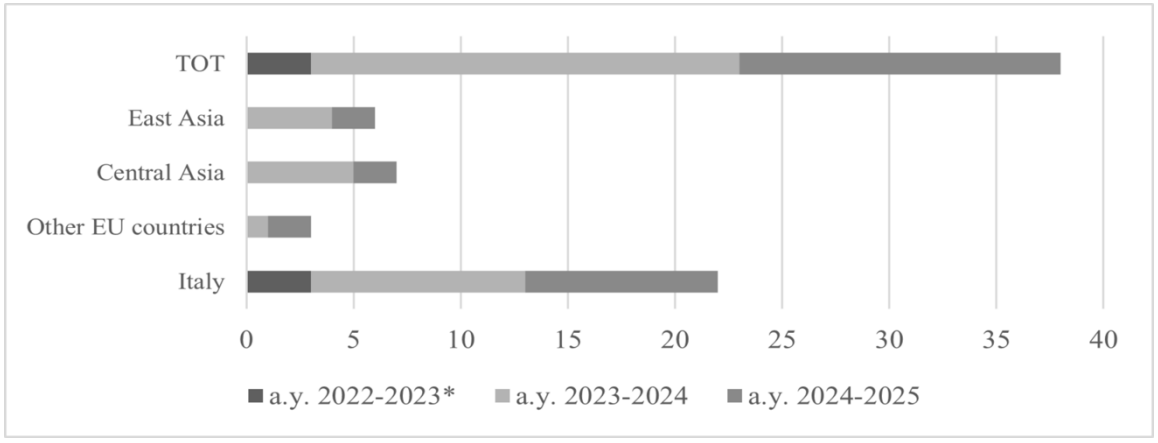

Figure 1. Students' demographics (data from the 2022-2023 academic year were collected during a pilot exercise in the course *China Today*).
Source: Author's elaboration.

The second stage consisted of a mental map drawing exercise. Students were asked to sketch China, its neighbouring countries, and any known communication routes to Europe, without referencing satellite imagery. They labelled places and features they considered significant and were assured that neither accuracy nor aesthetics would be evaluated. The exercise was framed as open-ended, with no right or wrong answers, and students were given approximately 20 minutes to complete it.

The final phase was organised as a peer-to-peer class discussion. Students, randomly grouped in threes or fours, were invited to observe each other's mapping processes, ask questions, and identify key points of convergence and divergence. This was followed by a classroom debate, which I facilitated. Figure 3 outlines the main themes that emerged during this session. The classroom was explicitly framed from the beginning of the course as a safe space for open exchange without fear of judgment or retaliation (Holley and Steiner, 2005). My role was to scaffold the discussion—encouraging inquiry, providing contextual insights, and constructively challenging emerging arguments. The overarching goal was to prompt critical reflection on students' worldviews and positionalities, both during the mapping process and as an ongoing interplay between internal reflection and social dialogue (Rose, 1997; Fu, 2024; cf. Table 1). The socio-semiotic analysis focused on graphic codes (location, size, texture of objects, such as dot lines and borders, presence/absence, and quantity), and toponyms, as well as verbal codes (verbalised representations).

3.1 China in-between: a semiotic reading of cognitive geomapping

The naïve cartographic production constitutes a form of visual data that can be analysed socio-semiotically as a set of graphical and textual codes. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) point out, "visual communication has its own particular means of expressing active relations between *participants* (represented people, places and things, including abstract 'things'), *processes* (the represented actions of these participants) and *circumstances* (e.g. the place where these actions occur)" (p. 45, emphasis in original). Given the significance of political intent in spatial representation (Zelyanskaya et al., 2017), students' map compositions are examined here through a multimodal lens (Ledin and Machin, 2019) to uncover how socially informed gazes (Said, 1978) and (geo)political positionalities emerge through the practice of mapping spatial alterities. Map design is analysed both in isolation and comparatively, to explore how "visual structuring [creates] meaningful 'propositions' by means of visual syntax" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 46)[2].

[2] All maps have been anonymised.

Figure 4, for instance, presents a partial cartographic vacuum in which China is rendered as an elliptical shape. While this may reflect geographical illiteracy, it could also suggest a learner's openness to alternative ontologies and a challenge to Western-centric epistemologies. In contrast, subsequent maps (Figures 5-13) show increasing levels of detail, revealing embedded analytical processes. Here, mapmakers draw on physical and anthropic features, spatial scale, repetition, and spatial arrangement to construct a cohesive whole. By Figure 6, the recurring depiction of China's "chicken-shaped" outline indicates an emerging geographical consciousness grounded in familiar symbolic forms.

Conversely, China as a geopolitical *alterity* is often constructed through negation—defined by "what it is not"—with emphasis placed on surrounding countries rather than clear border demarcations. For instance, in Figure 5, China is framed by Russia, Kazakhstan, Thailand, and Vietnam—four nations with which it maintains close bilateral relations. In Figure 7, proximity is expressed through two elements: the China Sea and the post-Soviet landscape comprising Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan. In Figure 8, China is nationally anchored through the identification of Beijing, positioned in the country's northeast. The surrounding region, particularly South Asia, is rendered as a mosaic of nation-states, reinforcing the image of China as a cohesive entity encircled by fragmented political identities. Notably, China's western borders are often left blank, suggesting an imaginary where East Asian spatialities dissolve into a continuous Eurasian landscape. A similar fragmented representation is visible in Figures 10 and 11. Exceptions to these common semiotic codes include Mount Everest in Figure 6 and the Gobi Desert in Figure 13, which introduce specific physical landmarks into otherwise predominantly political representations.

The abstract spatiality in Figure 5 represents China's political landscape through its capital on the right side of the circle and Tibet on the opposite side. These geographical markers reflect a discourse of internal friction, where the territorial supremacy of China's East over its West may unconsciously reinforce oversimplified narratives for Western audiences. This reductionist view flattens the socio-economic and political complexities, neglecting contextualised voices and alternative historical perspectives. In Figure 6, the spatial imbalance is depicted through human silhouettes, highlighting demographic density variations. Figure 13 further reinforces this by labelling certain areas as having "less people". Industrial production is symbolised through factory clusters in coastal regions, suggesting environmental degradation, while agricultural production is often associated with China's western regions. This may stem from the unconscious linking of the primary sector with rural, underdeveloped, and poorer areas (Figures 9, 10, 11). Notably, Chinese islands and archipelagos are absent in most student maps, creating idealised geographical intersections and overlapping marine spaces and frontiers, a theme explored further in the next section.

Cultural markers of Chinese spatialities, such as the Great Wall, frequently appear in student maps, though often placed randomly within "China" or "near Beijing," rather than signifying a specific region or connoting a historiographical narrative of Han civilisation defence (see Figures 6 and 11-13). Several maps (e.g., Figures 5, 9, and 12) show that the capital is more commonly identified as "Pechino" rather than "Beijing," the official transliteration according to the *pinyin* romanisation system. Similarly, Figure 12 uses "Nanchino" instead of "Nanjing". While the course was conducted in English and the cognitive mapping exercise expected to be completed in English, many Italian students still opted for Italian place names. This suggests a hierarchical distribution of spatial knowledge, privileging national(ist) transliterations over native toponyms.

Imaginative geographies of China often incorporate stereotypical landscaping representations drawn from Chinatowns in the Global North, such as red lanterns, chopsticks, rice bowls, sun umbrellas, and town portals. These symbols emerged during the mapping process as part of the discursive (re)production of Chinese spatial alterity. The dragon, a historically significant symbol tied to the emperor's heavenly origin (Ming Dynasty), later came to represent the non-Han Qing Empire as a legitimate power structure. In China's complex

hydrological system, the dragon is especially linked to the Yellow River (Huang He), which shapes both the territory and its people from its northwestern springs in Qinghai Province to the coast. As a mobile spatial analogy, the river-dragon offers a powerful metaphor; however, it was connotatively used by only one mapmaker (Figure 9)[3]. This absence raises questions about the transfer of meaning across cultural spatialities, as external gazes often lead to depoliticised, demasculinised representations of space, influenced by geopolitical power imbalances.

Figures 12 and 13 require further analysis, as they seem to reflect more complex cognitive mapping processes, with mapmakers oversaturating the maps with textual elements. Students indicated that their knowledge of Chinese culture came from their undergraduate Chinese Studies curricula or extensive time spent in China. The denotative meaning of textual codes underscores a wealth of information about urban areas, regions, and historical concepts.

In Figure 12, the western border is marked by "Via della Seta" (lit., Silk Road) near the Xinjiang Province, a key region historically traversed by caravans en route to Xi'an, the ancient capital also known as Chang'an. However, Xi'an is placed incorrectly in the far east, near the coast and Beijing, rather than in the official Chinese West. In both Figures 12 and 13, the non-Han West is largely blank, with only "Tibet" marked as a distinct space (dotted line in Figure 13) or positioned near Xinjiang, outside China's borders (Figure 12). In Figure 12, the West terminates at Sichuan, where cities like Chongqing and Chengdu are randomly placed, similar to the random positioning of Nanjing and Shanghai despite their actual proximity[4]. Additionally, Figure 12 places the megacity Shenzhen, a hub of China's high-tech industry, far to the north near Beijing, obscuring the connotative relationship between the coastal South, namely Guangdong Province, Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR), and Hong Kong SAR, and their geopolitical significance in relation to the South China Sea and the Maritime BRI.

In Figure 12, China's main rivers, the Yellow River and the Yangtze River, are drawn upside down, and their origins in the Tibetan plateau are neglected. This spatial absence signals a deep disconnect between the history of East and South Asia as presented in Western academia and the geopolitical realities rooted in China's physical geography and nation-state formation. It also points to broader discourses on Chinese pre-modern society, "hydraulic despotism," and early twentieth-century imperialist attempts to control nature through technology (Bonato, 2020). The omission of questions such as "where did things happen?" and "why there?"—often overlooked in Chinese Studies curricula—paradoxically surfaces in cognitive maps. These maps collapse historical narratives into the present, materialising an eclectic cartography where temporalities and conjunctures are vaguely defined, revealing much about the mapmaker's situated knowledge.

For instance, in Figure 12, arrows indicate the movement of Buddhism from India to China (circa first century C.E.), while the Russian locality of Nerchinsk is marked along the border to reference the 1698 Tsardom of Russia–Qing Dynasty Treaty, which regulated control over the Amur Basin. In Figure 13, South Asia is labelled as the "Indochina Peninsula," invoking French colonial spatialities. Northeast China, comprising Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces, is marked as "Manchuria," a historical non-Han border region and the homeland of the Manchu ethnic group that founded the last imperial dynasty (Qing Dynasty). The term is also tied to Japan's imperialist era and the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932. From a contemporary Chinese perspective, this label carries connotations of humiliation and decline. If used today, it could evoke anti-revolutionary rhetoric and national security concerns, as it may reflect local ethnic resistance to Han cultural assimilation and environmental exploitation in the region.

[3] For a discussion on the formation of textual-visual analogies within Chinese cognitive-linguistic structures, see Bonato (2024).

[4] Located east of Chengdu in the Sichuan Basin, Chongqing officially gained independence from Sichuan Province in 1997.

3.2 Diving into/out of China: the wordcloud, the map, and the discursive positionality

Performing naïve cartographic drawing within a safe space eventually revealed the mapmakers' discursive positionality, as they acted as (geo)political bodies through the use of visual-textual codes or blank spaces. The socio-semiotic analysis shows how cartographic practice can unconsciously construct complex code assemblages, reflecting how situated knowledge is cognitively and spatially embodied in everyday social experiences. By deframing hierarchical spatial orders and a Western-centric gaze, cognitive mental maps prompted individual and collective reflection, contributing to the decolonial unlearning process. In this way, the students' continuous cognitive motion—diving into and out of China as a spatial alterity—was guided by data triangulation through the wordcloud brainstorming exercise and the final discussion.

The brainstorming exercise was based on the question, "What comes to mind when you think of China?" The results reflect a sample of contingent encounters with things and ideas that the learners associate with China. The wordclouds in Figure 2 illustrate how both mythical and material-performative discourses are elicited. Notably, cultural, territorial, political, urban, and ethical issues appear to inform the students' imaginary of contemporary China.

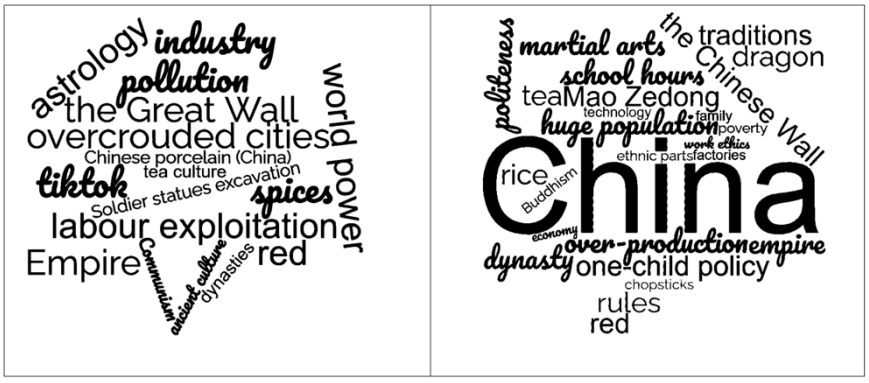

Figure 2. Wordclouds based on students' input, September 2023 and 2024. The images were generated using the open-source platform wordclouds.com.

Regarding the final restitution, Figure 3 reproduces the scheme I wrote on the blackboard to summarise the students' responses to the questions: "What do we refer to when we talk about Chinese spatialities?" and "Where is China?" The discussion facilitated the emergence of the students' positionalities as they mentally and spatially moved in and out of China, engaging with issues of landscaping, urbanisation, diaspora, and borders from their embodied perspectives. As noted in the previous section, common mapping signs highlighted the overlapping positions of significant cities and water features as border indicators, despite sea and river contours being notably blurred. Foodscapes, industrial production, and ethical considerations were reinforced and stereotypically perpetuated throughout the process, from the wordcloud to the final discussion. Moreover, Chinese language and popular culture were recognised as extending beyond the nation-state framework of China, with students acknowledging how other spaces, such as Singapore and Southeast Asia more broadly, are shaped by the presence of Chinese socio-cultural features.

Figure 3 shows a series of asterisks and brackets near place names, highlighting the students' contrasting connections between places, nations, cultural-economic assumptions, and popular stereotypes. These divergences were vocalised in the classroom. The discussion

revealed diverse conceptions of China as a spatial alterity, exposing contradictory (geo)political standpoints concerning territorial sovereignty. Students tentatively expressed their views on Tibet, Taiwan, and other neighbouring countries, often framing China's geopolitical behaviour as that of an aggressor, evoking atemporal spatialities based on a geo-graphical void. The Tibet/Xizang Autonomous Province case exemplifies this discursive approach, which fails to situate the Chinese/Han narrative within the historical counter-imperialist framework of the early twentieth century (Lone, 2024). This omission is underscored by the absence of the term "Xizang" in the students' linguistic spatialities. In contrast, Taiwan was alternatively represented as both part of Mainland China *and* an independent country. However, the students' geographical mental ordering was loosely grounded in historical knowledge and the current geopolitical situation in the area. On the other hand, the students appeared largely unaware of the contemporary geopolitical issues in Xinjiang Province, despite significant Western media attention in the late 2010s, such as reports from *The Guardian* (e.g., Wintour, 2021), which highlighted concerns over the cotton industry, forced labour, the Uyghur diaspora, and foreign fast-fashion corporations.

Regarding islands, archipelagos, and disputed marine frontiers, apart from Taiwan, Hainan in the South China Sea was the only marine area identified by some students as part of Mainland China. Long-standing disputes over sea borders, including those involving the Paracel and Spratly Islands (*Nansha qundao*) and the Senkaku Islands (*Diaoyu*), as well as their geopolitical relevance in the context of industrial decoupling and control over shipping routes, appeared as cognitive blind spots. These missing spatialities may partly result from Western media filtering information on the subject to downplay the role and benefits of European business in the matter. The influence of Western (post)colonial discourses is also embodied through geographical and linguistic imaginaries embedded in local landscapes, which often neglect to recognise local stories, exchanges, and mobilities (e.g., local fishing customs) outside the Western-centric narrative of national state building and maritime borders. The overall discussion led to a degree of frustration among students, particularly when asked to reflect on their perceptions of these alternative spatialities, especially concerning places and nations bordering China or situated within its peripheries[5].

4. Conclusions

Grounded in a poststructuralist approach to didactics, this case study was designed to "promote critical thinking based on a deconstructive concept of critique" (Ostendorf and Thoma, 2022, p. 43). Through a pedagogical sequence involving the collaborative creation of a wordcloud and a cognitive mapping exercise, the aim was to foster an "interruption of the commonplace or everyday normality [...] which is of particular importance for processes of subjectivation" (Ostendorf and Thoma, 2022, p. 45). Students were invited to engage with localised ontologies—specifically, the framing of *China as a spatial alterity*—while interrogating the Western-centric epistemologies that underpin dominant spatial imaginaries. Power asymmetries and spatial hierarchies, rooted in colonial legacies, were rendered visible both textually and visually, particularly through peer reflection and the final discussion I facilitated using a blackboard scheme. Ultimately, the exercise encouraged students to use mental mapping as a tool for introspection and critical reflection, challenging stereotypes and normative geopolitical perspectives.

[5] To mitigate potential tensions within the classroom, subsequent lectures focused on a thorough examination of European colonialism(s) in East and Southeast Asia, its impact on pre-modern Chinese economy and culture, and later forms of Western and Japanese imperialism, including their "spheres of influence" and extraterritorial legislation, in relation to the Chinese "century of humiliation" narrative. The discussion also addressed Sinocentrism, drawing on examples from pre-modern culturalism and the tributary system, as well as contemporary forms of racism enacted in China.

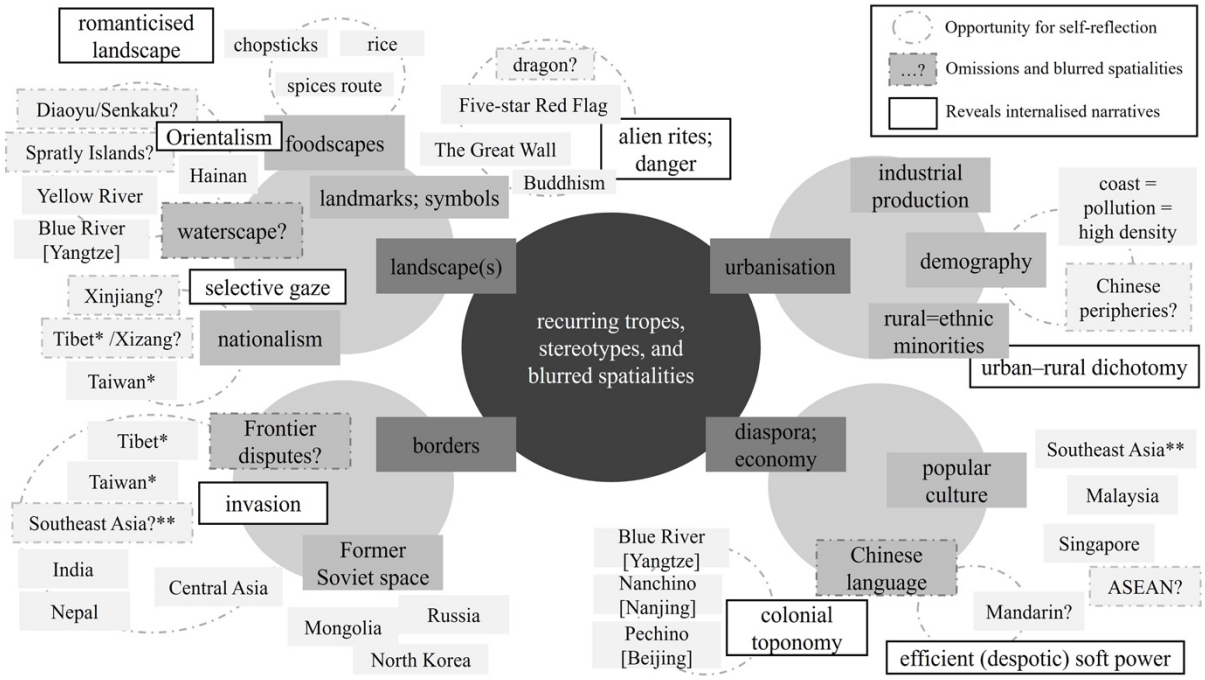

Figure 3. Representation based on the in-class restitution of students' mapping impressions and reflections. Source: designed by the author, 2025.

Though limited in scope, it offered an entry point into broader processes of decolonial awareness, prompting students to recognise how their own positionalities shape perceptions of space and difference.

Although the exercise was not designed to quantitatively assess students' geographical literacy, the results reveal a significant degree of "parochial views of the world" (Kong et al., 1994, p. 263). In particular, three key issues emerged: limited awareness of maritime frontiers and disputed sea regions; the use of Italian toponyms in place of internationally recognised or locally endorsed names; and the persistence of Eurocentric representations that frame China and its surrounding spaces through a Western spatial imaginary. This is particularly concerning within the context of an undergraduate E-Tourism curriculum, where students are likely to work in internationally oriented settings—such as hotels, travel agencies, or as tour guides—and will need to navigate culturally diverse expectations around place, identity, and hospitality.

This paper presents an exploratory, small-scale exercise designed to foster critical thinking through the mapping of spatial alterities. The methodology is replicable and adaptable to contexts beyond East Asia (e.g., the African continent). As a visual and reflective practice, naïve cartography can serve as a pedagogical tool for consciously guided acts of un-learning—a preliminary step toward the decolonisation of curricula (Fu, 2024; Heilbronn, 2025). Building on Harley's call to deconstruct maps as biopolitical dispositifs (Harley, 1989), the drawing of mental maps becomes a point of departure for questioning our (geo)political positionalities and confronting hegemonic narratives. These include both Western-centric representations of the exotic Other and dominant narratives of power that sustain (dis)illusions around Sinocentric mapping traditions (Crampton, 2001; Somdahl-Sands, 2015). When combined with "carto-talks", the mapping process enables the emergence of embodied beliefs concerning spatial ordering, and the visibility or erasure of historical and contemporary events embedded in geography, without imposing normative judgments.

Limited or advanced cartographic knowledge of distant regions does not necessarily reflect biased attitudes toward spatial alterities.

However, stereotypes shaped by social and cultural influences can hinder intercultural communication. As Reynolds and Vinterek (2016, p. 79) suggest, such "mixed messages" are not inherently problematic if addressed within a fair-minded and critically engaged teaching environment. Lecturers, acting as scaffolding facilitators, play a key role in sustaining a respectful classroom space and guiding both students—and themselves—through processes of introspection that can foster a shared awareness of the need to interrogate positionalities as a form of collective responsibility (Moosavi, 2023). Doing so requires a critical understanding of non-Western ontologies grounded in local cultures, histories, and languages. As many voices and cartographies remain marginalised, integrating critical geography with area studies in Italian higher education becomes essential to navigating current geopolitical and socio-economic crises.

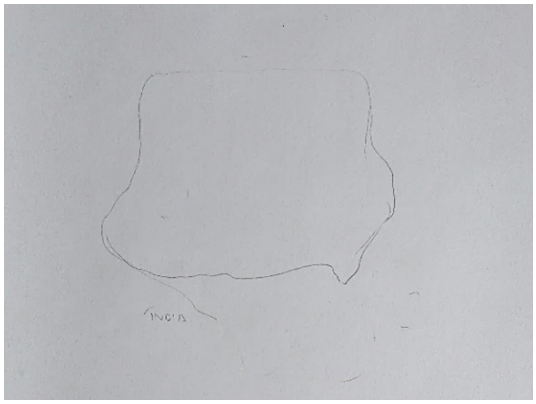

Figure 4. Sketch map with minimal embedded signs. China appears as an imagined spatial alterity, framed as a closed nation-state. Its southern periphery is geopolitically linked to neighbouring India.

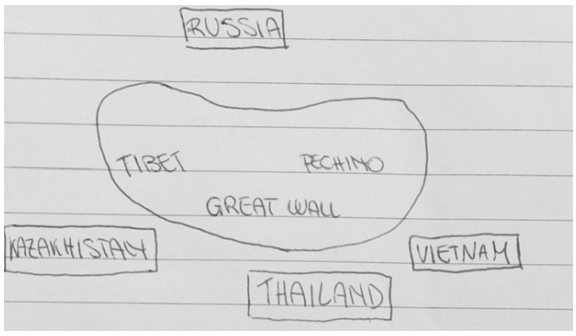

Figure 5. Sketch map of China highlighting external geopolitical spatialities over internal features.

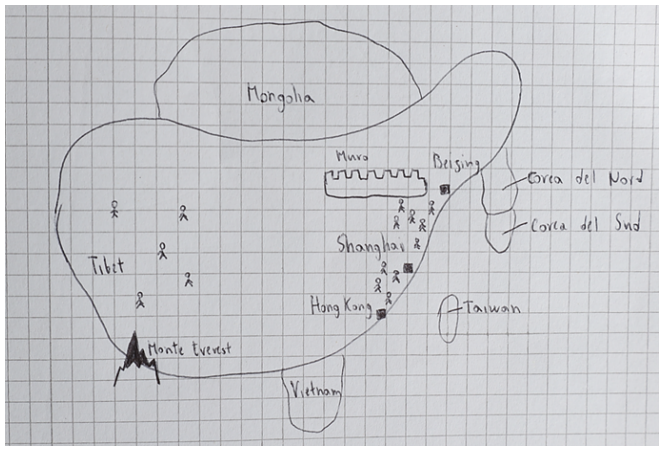

Figure 6. Cultural, physical, and geopolitical signs inform the production of this map of China.

Figure 7. China is geopolitically defined by its borders and national flag. The northern frontier includes Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan, though its exaggerated size may suggest Kazakhstan. Ships and aeroplanes symbolise mobility across borders.

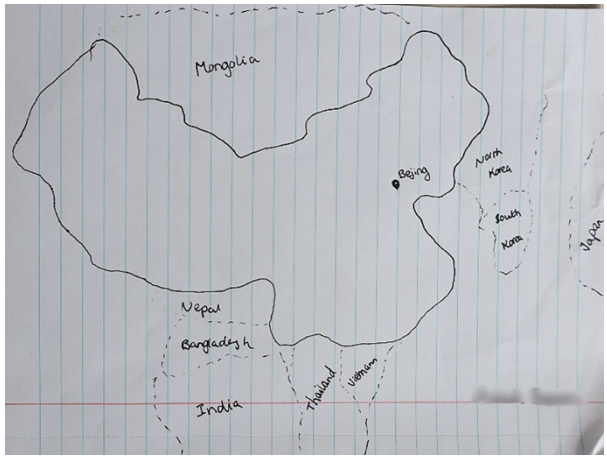

Figure 8. Sketch map of China with some neighbouring countries to the east and south. South and Southeast Asia are imprecisely represented, with non-bordering countries like Bangladesh and Thailand included, while Bhutan, Myanmar, and Laos are omitted. Non-Chinese territories are disproportionately scaled, reflecting Mercator-like distortions. Beijing is correctly positioned.

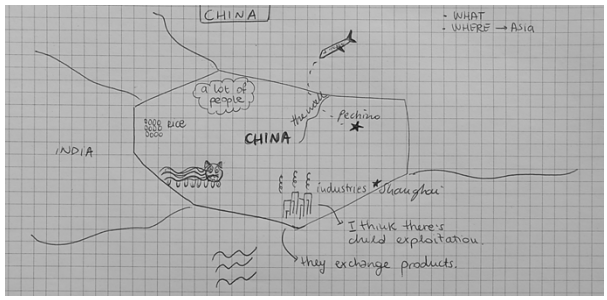

Figure 9. China is represented as a heptagonal shape, with internal space coded through cultural, demographic, economic, and environmental features. Rice fields and polluted industrial zones are placed in spatial opposition. Borders are indicated by sea waves (bottom) and the label "India" (left).

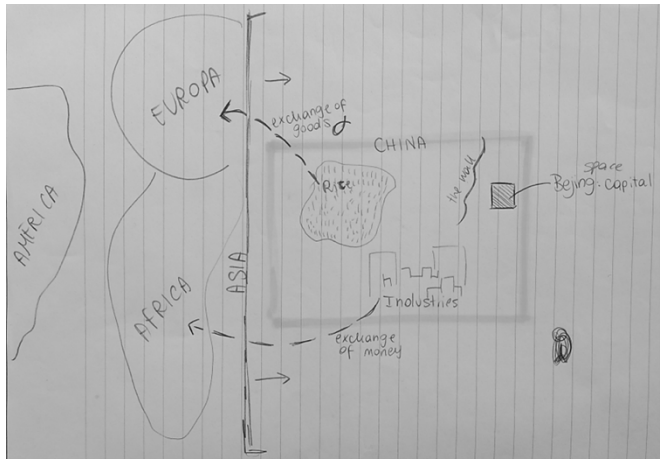

Figure 10. Sketch map depicting China as an autonomous yet economically connected bloc, with hierarchical outer spatialities arranged from "Europe" at the top to "Africa" at the bottom of the page.

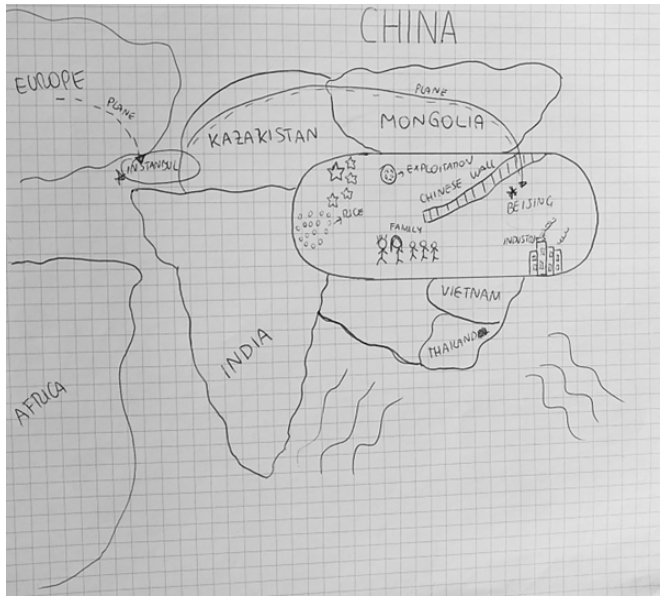

Figure 11. China's elliptical shape is framed geopolitically by the Indian subcontinent, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan. South and Southeast Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar, appear as blank spaces. Türkiye's capital, Istanbul, is coded as the transit point linking "Europe" to China.

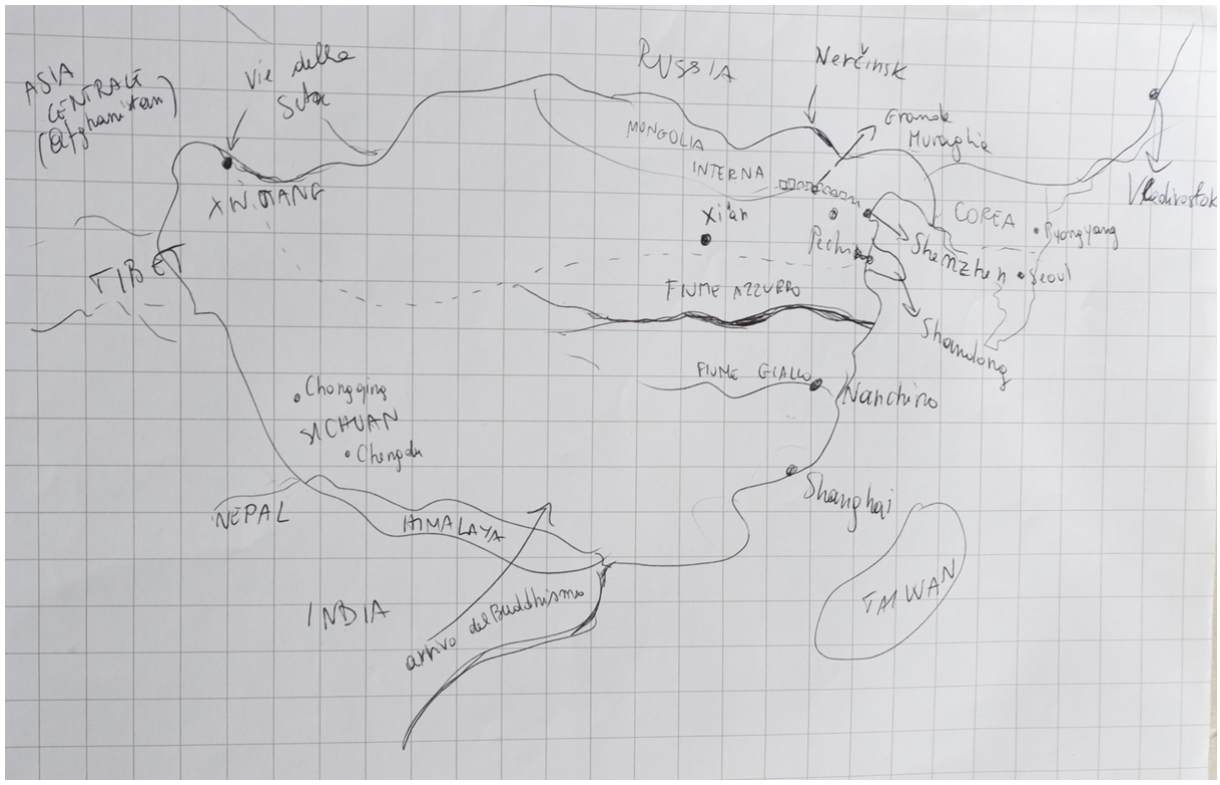

Figure 12. Cartographic drawing of China, featuring a complex coding system that reflects the mapmaker's cognitive mapping process.

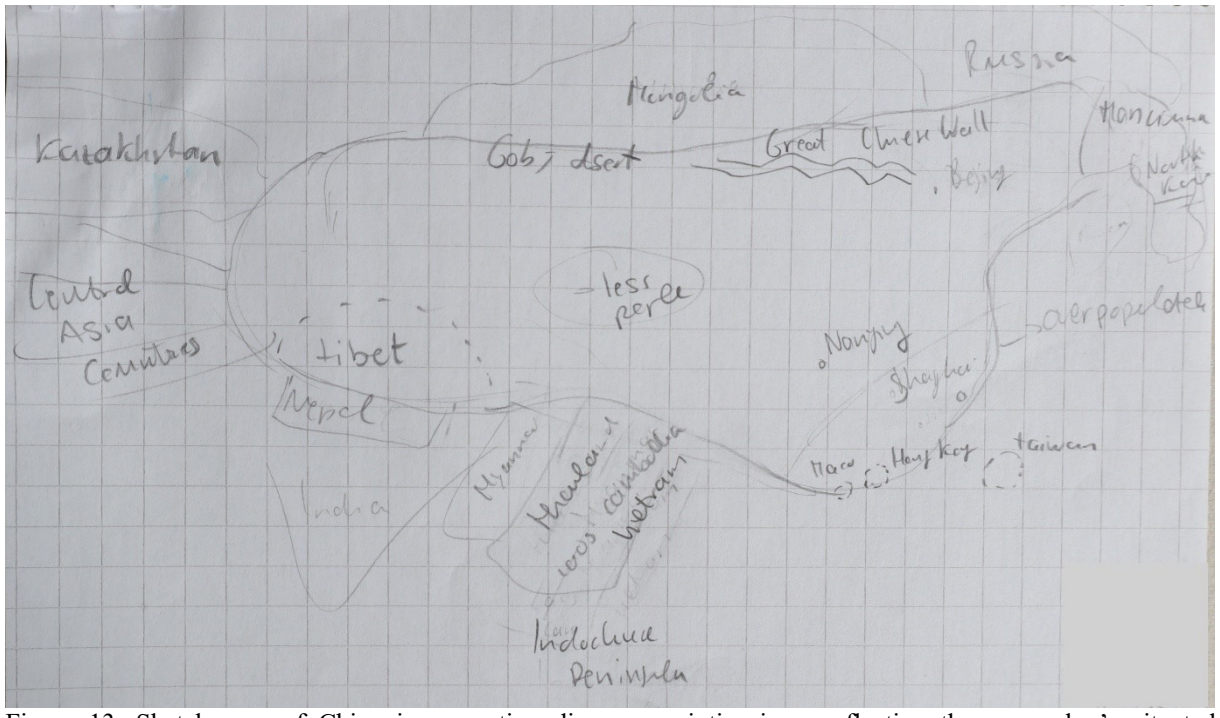

Figure 13. Sketch map of China incorporating diverse semiotic signs, reflecting the mapmaker's situated knowledge and geopolitical positionality.

Ensure that students understand how to behave in "safe spaces"	• Open the discussion: Ask students, "*What does a safe space mean to you*?" Introduce the concept of brave spaces—environments that encourage respectful dialogue while embracing discomfort. Visual aids (e.g. speech bubble clouds with student responses) can be helpful. • Address misconceptions: Clarify that safe spaces are not about censorship or comfort, but about fostering respectful and critical engagement. • Co-create ground rules: Collaboratively define behavioural norms (e.g. inclusive language, listening without interruption, confidentiality). • Encourage reflection: Use tools such as the Moodle Forum to support ongoing reflection on classroom dynamics.	5'–10'
Collectively create a wordcloud	• Prompt brainstorming: Ask students, "*What comes to mind when you think of China?*" and generate a collective wordcloud. • Introduce complexity: This serves as a low-stakes entry into the grey areas of safe space, where themes of identity, power, and marginalisation may emerge through spontaneous associations of spatial alterities.	10'
Suggest the mapping exercise	• Introduce the task: Ask students to draw a map of China from memory, incorporating socio-political, cultural, economic, and geopolitical features alongside physical geography. Use of reference materials (e.g. Google Maps) is not allowed. • Clarify expectations: Emphasise that this is not about cartographic accuracy or aesthetic values, but about exploring perceptions, assumptions, and spatial imaginaries.	20'
Initiate a peer-to-peer discussion	• Facilitate group exchange: In small groups (4–5 students), participants share their maps and reflect on what appears, what is missing, and what seems essential. • Reinforce safe space principles: Promote active listening, mutual respect, and a no-ridicule environment to support meaningful and inclusive dialogue.	10'
Proceed to the final discussion	• Invite reflection: Students share insights from the drawing process (positionality) and group discussions (knowledge co-production, openness to diverse perspectives and spatial scales). • Facilitate visual restitution: Reconstruct key elements on the blackboard to synthesise findings. • Guide engagement: The lecturer ensures respectful dialogue and navigates sensitive or ambiguous topics with care. • Embrace discomfort productively: A well-established safe/brave space allows for engagement with uncomfortable or grey-zone issues, while reducing potential frustration or disengagement.	15'
Facultative: Open a Moodle thread to enable students to continue the discussion asynchronously, revisit reflections, and deepen peer-to-peer engagement.		

Table 1. How to… (estimated total time required for the activity: 60 minutes).

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